

SAVA – ALTERED COURSE AND SUBMERGED FACTS: THE MYTH ABOUT THE LACK OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION DURING THE GREAT ZAGREB FLOOD OF 1964 CIRCULATING FOR SIX DECADES

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Abstract: *The flood caused by the overflowing of the Sava River on the night of 25/26 October 1964 is considered by most expert sources and in various scientific fields, areas and branches to be the greatest natural disaster to hit Zagreb. A total of 17 lives lost were recorded, while 40000 people were left homeless, and a third of the city area at the time was flooded. The damage was wide-spread, both material and one that cannot be measured against economic criteria, which is why the great affliction quickly became a major disaster, the effects of which are still classified in most relevant publications as the most severe ever recorded in the history of the Croatian capital. Documentary accounts of this crisis situation clearly show a lack of archival and descriptive records about the communication activities which, despite the interpretations present in the public discourse since the event itself, were implemented intensively and effectively – before and during, as repeatedly emphasised, the most tragic Zagreb flood. This paper, especially with the analysis of primary sources, identifies a crisis communication practice that refutes the previous narrative according to which “no one cared to prevent the disaster” and also shows the effect of media discontinuity on the formation of collective consciousness, as well as the significance of crisis communication in the process of forming institutional memory. The research results, in addition to the importance of a timely, structured and continuous mass communication in crisis conditions, point to the need for formalised procedures and defined standards, as well as strengthening communication and security protocols in the context of potential and realised urban threats.*

Keywords: *Zagreb flood, media and crisis communication, crisis management, institutional memory, threats*

1 INTRODUCTION

Zagreb was originally founded in a geographically hilly and foothill area, with characteristics that in general provide sufficient natural protection from river floods. Later urban development trends, focused on the Lower Town area, recognised the river route as a limiting factor for further development, but also as a potential threat to the population in the Zagreb area, where, in the past, floods often caused material damage, and often more serious destruction with

serious consequences, including human loss. The construction of the railway corridor on an elevated area, acting as a kind of dam, determined the threat to the city centre from the spread or penetration of water, which was not the case for areas south of this barrier built in 1870. The expansion and development of the city necessitated the regulation of the flow of the Sava River as it was at that time, but the lack of financial resources hindered and repeatedly halted the construction of the original embankment, which was being destroyed by water torrents (Slukan Altić, 2010).

The 1964 flood has been declared by various professions and their official sources, as well as influential media, as the greatest natural disaster with the most severe consequences, continuously conveying a unified interpretation of the event over six decades, while referring to limited sources of that time and reduced historical studies. Thus, in the same way, the indisputably great disaster that struck Zagreb is still represented in official publications and in their own publications today, among others, by Hrvatske vode, the City of Zagreb, specialised history websites and other publishers, citing at the same time an unnamed source or several of them who claimed that on the eve of the flood “no alarm was sounded”, that “the news was announced late on the radio and television”, inevitably presenting a direct implication, as a widely accepted judgement, that “...no one cares (cared) to prevent the disaster.” (HRT, 2014). Most sources about the period leading up to the disaster report a lack of timely or complete crisis communication, which adversely affected the process of implementing self-protective behaviour, as well as systematic measures.

Večernji list and Vjesnik were the dominant print media in the Zagreb area at that time, and their archives represented relevant databases for the reconstruction of historical events. Before the advent of online services and modern digital platforms, Vjesnik’s newspaper documentation had been the only public newspaper documentation that, in addition to internal resources, was also intensively used by journalists from all other media (Cenger, 2020).

The analysis of newspaper and electronic media publications as well as original documents related to the 1964 flood undoubtedly indicates a gap in the objective and comprehensive presentation of the crisis event throughout history, implying the conclusion that historical events of public importance are constructed based on a reduced scope of information, an insufficient sample of sources, evidence and perspectives usually required for an objective and realistic presentation of the factual context and confirmed circumstances.

2 METHODS AND SUBJECT OF RESEARCH

The research uses several different scientific and research methods, as well as independent sources of primary and secondary data. The descriptive method is used to describe relevant and verified claims and observed related processes, while the content analysis method is used to collect data from the range of material relevant to the topic collected in a targeted manner. The comparative method is used to compare related facts and information that contain similarities and correlations, and taking into account the importance of historical sources, the historical research method and the case study method are also applied. The inductive method is used to reach a conclusion about general judgements, while the deductive method is used to derive and synthesise individual conclusions in the final part of the paper.

The research includes an analysis of actual communication patterns implemented in practice immediately before and during the great Zagreb flood, as well as a reflection of the detected individual operational and communication activities on the indicated concept of crisis management.

The role of media in a crisis situation is also taken into account and the impact of media releases in the post-crisis period on the subsequent interpretation of historical facts and related circumstances is determined, while considering the risks of individual media formats for a credible and objective account of events over a longer period and their transmission through different channels, models and formats.

At the same time, initiatives are registered that promptly result in the mobilisation of individuals or interest groups and determine the practical actions of relevant services and key stakeholders in the crisis environment, while evaluating the level of preparedness of the collective, especially specialised organisations, but also society as a whole, to respond to the crisis in the observed context. A special research interest is focused on the concept of institutional memory, the creation and maintenance of a public narrative based on permanently available media records and the use of acquired experience for the purpose of raising the standards of modern urban policies and strengthening security strategies.

By comparing the media reach, the applied characteristic styles of each type of media present at the time, and the effects achieved in the public space – television, with the help of moving images, which is the greatest comparative advantage of this, then developing, medium – naturally conveys the most powerful depictions of tragedy and the scale of the disaster. However, in peak crisis load, radio takes on the dominant media informative, intermediary, connection and advisory role and has the continuous function of fast, even proactive transmission of messages and useful instructions during an emergency situation. Due to the technical limitations, production principles and general characteristics, newspapers are mainly focused on addressing the consequences of the crisis. They integrate a more extensive informative component with diverse social and political and even commercial communication, incorporating an adequate ratio of educational content, social and health topics and other thematic elements useful for mitigating the consequences of the disaster.

In addition to previously conducted research and analysis, the final part of the paper provides explicit and substantiated profiles of the conclusions on the implementation of confirmed, intensive internal and external communication processes before the culmination of the crisis caused by the flood, with the aim of informing the public and taking appropriate measures as part of preparation for extraordinary circumstances and determination of the adverse effects of the natural disaster. In connection with this, the areas of research interest related to the area of population information and the implementation of public alerts regarding the impending danger, the possible repercussions that an interruption in the production of media content may have on the creation of a narrative about a historically significant event, and the possibility of improving the system that suffered a security threat in order to prepare for potential new challenges, are profiled. These research questions also give rise to hypotheses that will be confirmed or rejected throughout the paper:

H1: Despite common claims, the population of Zagreb was warned about the danger of the 1964 flood through the media.

H2: The lack of preserved media releases led to inaccurate historical representations of the event.

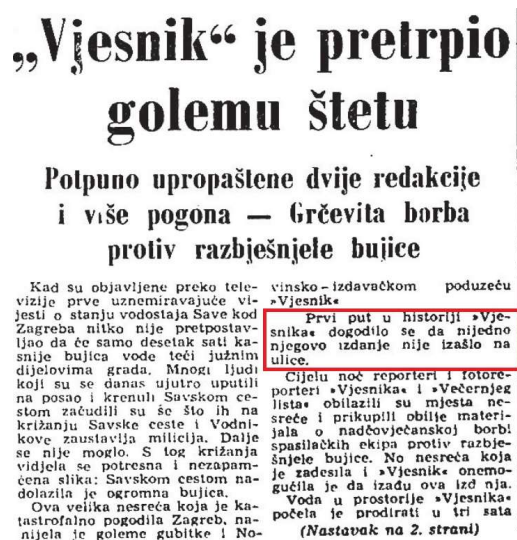
H3: The experience of the 1964 crisis greatly influenced the development of safety standards and flood protection systems.

The results of the conducted research can be used as guidelines for improving practice in crisis management and communication systems, certain assumptions for regulating media standards in reporting on and during threats and major disasters in urban areas, or as a potential framework for establishing procedures and defining useful protocols in the concept of modern crisis management.

3 (OTHER) THINGS IN THE AIRWAVES

The first available and publicly accessible records of the great flood that hit Zagreb on the night of Sunday, 25 October to Monday, 26 October 1964 were created in the late hours of 27 October, and were published that morning in a joint edition of Vjesnik and Večernji list. Due to damage to the editorial offices and water penetration into the printing house, for the first time since the beginning of newspaper publishing in Zagreb, no daily newspapers were printed, published or distributed on the day of the flood (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



The first day in Zagreb's history without newspapers

Source: Joint edition of Vjesnik and Večernji list, 27 October 1964

The original of the special newspaper edition shows the media announcements and content in the joint edition of Vjesnik and Večernji list, which was published on Tuesday, 27 October 1964 (see Figure 2). Comparing these records with other primary media sources and official

notes relating to the events surrounding the flood, it emerges that there was a full two-day delay from the first indications of a possible disaster to the first newspaper announcements intended for the public. In addition, more than 48 hours passed from the first recorded preparatory activities of the then City Flood Defence Headquarters to the reports printed in newspapers, which indicates that informing the public through the press does not correspond to the principles of journalistic topicality and media promptness.

An analysis of the content of the special newspaper edition published in a limited circulation also indicates the lack of journalistic notes on the activities and events during the time of preparation for the crisis situation. The first issue of the joint edition focused on the events following the culmination of the crisis, which is confirmed by the titles of the main articles published on the front page of the newspaper. The conclusions stand out prominently in the titles: "The worst is over" and "The water is receding".

The intense sequence of events caused by the crisis situation and the temporarily reduced dynamics and scope of information content in the press are crowding out a more specific overview of events from the chronology, as well as simpler, but also significant news, as well as complex activities that preceded the highest amplitude in the development and persistence of the crisis situation. As the first statement about the disaster in Zagreb by the President of the City Assembly, Pero Pirker, the newspaper only reports the one taken directly on the night of the creation of the special newspaper edition, that is, the one that was offered to journalists and recorded almost two days after the serious level of threat from the overflow of the Sava River was observed.

Figure 2



Headline of the joint newspaper edition with a selection of cover content

Source: Joint edition of Vjesnik and Večernji list, 27 October 1964

In addition, taking into account the social system of the time and the high political functions of numerous key and responsible persons in the observed period and area, it is to be expected that the mass media communication was focused on activities to address the consequences of the disaster and mitigate the effects of the crisis. Although the concept of crisis communication implies content that, *inter alia*, aims to reassure the public (Jugo, 2017), in the print media there is a noticeable focus on political icons at the expense of information with real and practical value in an emergency situation and the actual environment.

The very first newspaper edition after the major disaster highlights on its front page and in the priority block, along with other content, the news that Josip Broz Tito has already been personally informed “the previous day” about the situation in Zagreb and “other areas at risk in Croatia” and that he was notified about the measures being taken to “provide assistance to the affected population as quickly as possible and eliminate the consequences of this severe natural disaster.” At the same time, news about the actions taken and implemented by key stakeholders of the security system and other involved entities is not adequately reported on in the already limited newspaper columns.

Although printed records of the activities of responsible individuals and organisations before the disaster are not available to the wider public and the average consumer, which understandably leads to the conclusion of the absence of coordinated activities, public information and responses to the perceived danger, other types of relevant material created at that time testify to the actions and reactions of crisis management and the implemented processes in an unstructured, but nevertheless established and sustainable information system. As explained by Sapunar (2000), speed, accessibility and the lowest technical requirements compared to other channels for transmitting information are the main characteristics of radio and that is why radio waves have to this day remained the primary model of individual and mass communication in emergency situations despite the development of modern technologies and communication platforms.

However, sound that is aired, if additional technologies and devices are not used, will not be saved and is therefore not suitable as a primary source of data for subsequent reconstructions and chronological reviews of phenomena and events. Up until the period of computerisation and digitalisation, social events and developments, especially those of historical significance, had only been recorded due to printing techniques in which numerous, more or less important narratives were preserved, which have been interpreted and transmitted differently over time. The claim that over time, even the greatest disasters with catastrophic consequences can be displaced from collective memory if they were not previously adequately recorded and archived, is certainly supported by the verifiable facts surrounding the flash flood caused by the Medveščak stream in 1651, when Zagreb suffered a loss of three times more lives than in the flood of the Sava River in 1964! Indeed, on the day of the tragedy on 26 July, as many as 52 people, in a city with significantly fewer inhabitants than in 1964, lost their lives, and a significant part of the inhabited and uninhabited area was devastated (Fagač, 2018). Since there were no official records at that time, it is estimated that in 1651 Zagreb had the population of

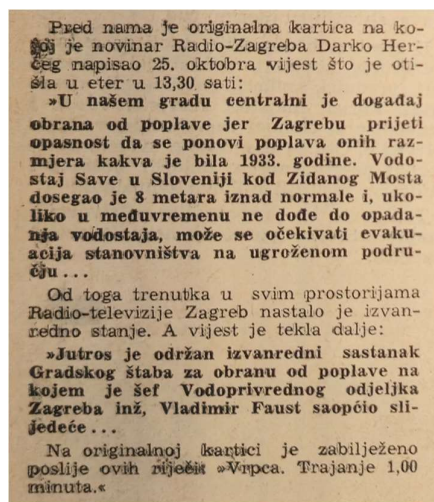
only about 3,000, which represents a mortality rate of 2.08% caused by the flash flood, while that caused by the Sava flood was 0.0030% (estimate based on the 1961 census¹).

At that time, there were no newspaper publications to directly record the event; the first newspaper in Zagreb was printed 184 years later and has been published in the Croatian language since 1835 (Narodne novine (Official Gazette), 2025).

Although temporary and short-lived, it is evident that the interruption of only one day in the creation of permanent news content also influenced the narrative about the 1964 flood, belittling the unjustifiably selfless and noble actions of our numerous fellow citizens and their devoted efforts aimed at preserving their own and the lives of others. These heroes, mostly unknown to the public, were recognised and thanked by many involved in humanitarian actions, rescue operations and the recovery from the consequences of the disaster, and great credit was given to media professionals, especially Radio and Television Zagreb.

The widespread false narrative regarding the lack of flood warnings in Zagreb and related flood protection activities is refuted by the content of the news bulletin broadcast live on 25 October 1964 at 1:30 p.m. on Radio Zagreb. The preserved facsimile of the original “card” of the news bulletin by Darko Herceg, undoubtedly confirms that flood protection was timely positioned at the centre of public interest and general social importance (see Figure 3), which has been a completely unknown fact in the narrative so far and does not appear in any interpretative form, let alone repeated in public discourse.

Figure 3



Newspaper report on the work of RTV employees with a transcript of a news bulletin broadcast on
Radio Zagreb

Source: Studio, No. 31, November 1964

In the announcement of the report, the journalist also reveals the previously unknown activities of the so-called City Flood Defense Headquarters, which, as confirmed by the journalist's note,

¹ According to data from the Federal Institute of Statistics of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, in 1961, Zagreb had a population of 586,020.

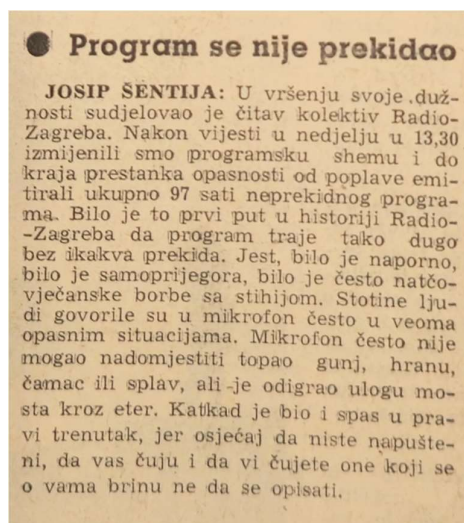
had been activate since the early morning hours of 25 October. According to a reliable note, it also included relevant experts, and the journalist's report contains an audio recording of a statement by the head of the "Zagreb Water Management Department", engineer Vladimir Faust, who was responsible for the the then current hydrological phenomena.

The original journalist's card also reveals clear, direct and public communication about the presence of an objective danger and the potential further development of the threat, as well as the possibility of evacuating residents from the affected areas, if "the water level does not drop".

Although the archival material does not explicitly reveal it, and Croatian Radio and Television in its documentary programme, despite their own exceptional contribution, intensive role and significant participation, paradoxically denies the intensive media activities carried out – the aforementioned radio announcement marked the start of the extraordinary and historically significant broadcasting by Radio Zagreb completely dedicated to the public good and in the service of crisis communication.

According to documented statements from a preserved interview with the then director of Radio and Television Zagreb, Ivo Bojanić, Radio Zagreb completely adapted its programme to the situation in a way to "warn about the seriousness of the situation" (see Figure 4). This materialised statement, which is also reported in this paper, is part of an interview that the heads of Radio and Television gave to a journalist of the weekly Studio², Ivan Kreutz, and represents another in a series of arguments that challenge claims about late news releases, unannounced alerts and the absence of warnings, as well as non-functional media in the period before, during and after the crisis.

Figure 4



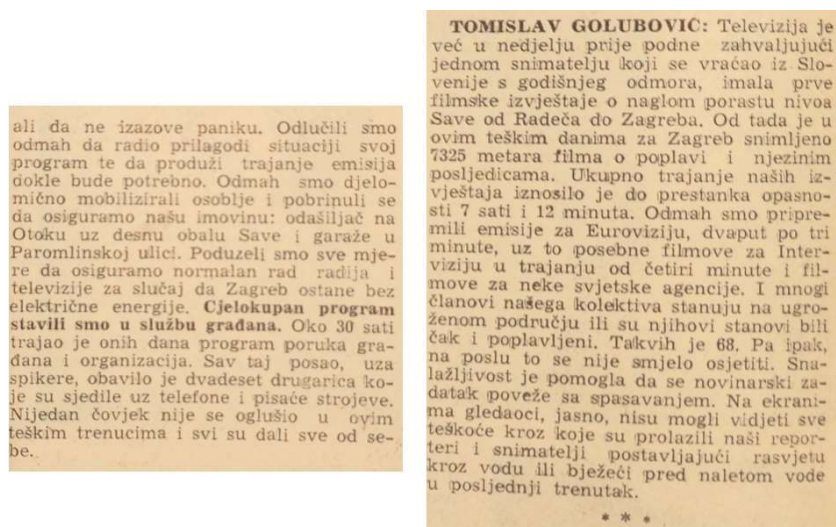
Newspaper report on the work of RTV employees with a transcript of a news bulletin broadcast on
Radio Zagreb

Source: Studio, No. 31, November 1964

² Yugoslav illustrated review of television, radio, film, theatre and music

Radio Sljeme also joined the efforts of mass media warning of the flood danger as part of public media crisis communication with announcements at 4:30 p.m. From documents, audio, video and photographic records created in the period from 25 to 29 October 1964, it is clear that the radio programme, which at that time usually lasted between 12 and 5 p.m. each day, was for the first time not interrupted until the danger had passed and was broadcast for 97 hours continuously on the frequencies of as many as three stations. The special work regime of radio announcers and journalists, as well as the efforts of technical and television crews, are condensed by the directors of Radio and Television, presenting exact data on the collected or recorded material, the special programme produced and the professional approach of the entire team (see Figure 5).

Figure 5



Data on the reach of radio and TV broadcasting with a description of reporting practices during the crisis

Source: Studio, No. 31, November 1964

Bojanić (1964) points out that the staff was mobilised, the technical prerequisites were ensured, and the programme was put at the service of citizens, adding that the programme with messages from citizens and organisations alone lasted 30 hours (see Figure 6).

According to a statement by Golubović (1964), the first video materials and reports on the significant rise in water levels were broadcast by television as early as Sunday morning, which also indicates timely information through this medium, which, according to the same source, recorded as much as 7,325 meters of film about the flood and its consequences. In total, despite the restrictive and dangerous conditions, as much as 7 hours and 12 minutes of television journalistic reports were produced and promptly broadcast on the programme, and the news programmes achieved a record number of live broadcasts in one day. Through the synergy of all media professionals, efforts were made to ensure the greatest possible reach of radio and

television news content, and for most in the affected areas, radio was the “only connection to the world” (see Figure 7).

The presented information on the concept of public communication via electronic media also refutes previously generally accepted assumptions about the absence of informational and preventive activities and the failure to take protective, or operational, measures from the concept of crisis management at all available levels.

Figure 6

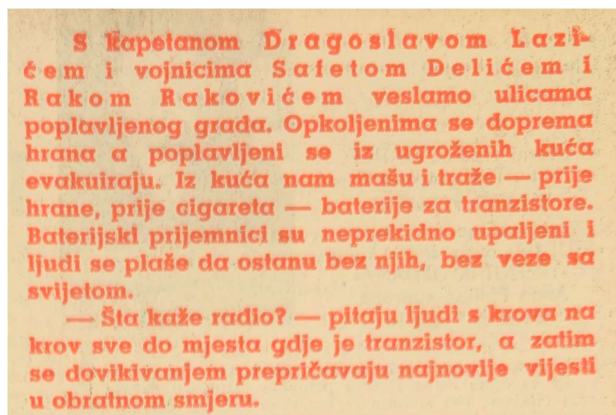


Broadcasting citizens' messages in a radio programme that is listened to in the affected areas via
transistors on the rooftops of houses

Source: Studio, No. 31, November 1964

Such actions are defined by Coombs (2007: 5) as a set of activities primarily aimed at preventing and minimizing the actual damage caused by a crisis, while Mihalinić (2018: 19) identifies the core task of crisis management as managing the organization's exit from the crisis in the most painless and efficient manner possible. This process should involve intensive cooperation across all organizational levels, effective internal and external communication, prompt decision-making, and the ability to manage information.

Figure 7



The importance and functionality of radio in a crisis

Source: Studio, No. 31, November 1964

4 CONCLUSION

After the great flood in Zagreb in 1964, a conclusion was formed in public discourse about the absence of crisis communication and crisis management activities before the disaster, which eventually turned into a myth and had continued to exist in various types of portrayals of the crisis event. Despite such interpretations, primary data sources confirm intensive, even record-breaking media efforts in the critical period. The circumstances that caused a short-term interruption in the production of the daily press influenced the omission of newspaper reports on activities undertaken with the aim of informing the population about the source and development of the danger, which in later documentary reports that were created on the basis of newspaper documentation, due to a large number of victims and the extent of material damage, led the authors, and then the general public, to make erroneous claims about the communication practice. In the “Poplava” (The Flood) documentary film by director and screenwriter Bogdan Žižić, filmed the same year, the time and events that preceded the disaster were not mentioned once in its 25-minute duration. From the newspaper archives, an announcement dated 4 November 1964 stands out, in which, although under a title that considers the flood to be a series of tragic circumstances, there is an interview with experts from the Hydrological Department of the Meteorological and Hydrological Institute, who revealed that the Institute had warned of the danger and the need for extraordinary defence against a possible flood on 15 October, i.e. ten days before the crisis (Večernji list, 1964). The influence of media reports on historical truth is also evident in the case of the 1651 flood, the extent of which, although claiming three times more victims, because newspapers did not exist at that time, is significantly less known, and even contemporary sources do not recognise it as the natural disaster with the highest number of human casualties.

At the time of the crisis, radio was the main medium, but since, due to its technical characteristics, it does not leave a permanent record, the broadcast content and related facts about the processes that took place have not been used in the subsequent interpretation of

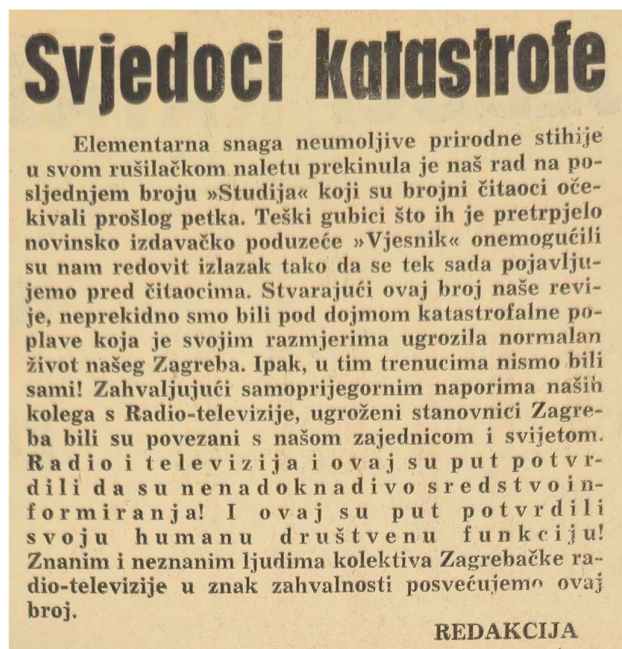
historical reality. The limited but relevant records created during the crisis, contrary to popular belief, confirm the high level of media adaptation to the emergency situation and the intensity of public information, and also refute the previous collective position. It has also been indisputably confirmed that public communication led to the mobilisation of individuals and legal entities, ensured communication continuity as a prerequisite for organising operational activities and, to a significant extent, rescuing and guiding citizens during the crisis.

Based on the evidence collected, it can also be concluded that crisis communication took responsibility for the insufficient level of crisis management in individual segments, but the strategic activities that followed in terms of building a flood protection system had a significant effect on the raising of the safety standard in the defence of the Croatian capital from floods, as well as the adoption of more specific protocols in the concept of the civil protection system and the formal organisation of the entire professional field.

All three hypotheses set out in the introductory part of the paper were confirmed.

Following the conclusions and views and expressions of the Studio editorial staff from 1964 (see Figure 8), which the author of this paper supports, the research is dedicated to all former colleagues and media professionals who, in times of crisis, provide support to the Zagreb and general public, often neglecting their primary and private roles.

Figure 8



Expressions of respect and gratitude to media professionals

Source: Studio, No. 31, November 1964

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